

The Hell of the Soviet Prisoner of War Camps

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I want to thank Dallas Michelbacher and Esther Meier for their excellent presentations.¹ Michelbacher offers an overview of the scale, scope, organization, and structure of German prisoner of war camps and assorted detention sites that reveals the key role played by Wehrmacht forces in acts of violence, atrocity, and mass murder against Soviet prisoners of war (POWs), but also against other civilian and military victims. Meier's project seeks to "reconstruct biographies of Soviet prisoners – both men and women" and to "clarify their fate." This effort not only restores the identity of those killed but situates them as historical actors in their own right. Furthermore, Meier helps us to understand the double-edged fate of those Soviet POWs who survived Nazi incarceration yet also faced a reckoning with Stalin's paranoia and the experience of filtration led by the NKVD (Soviet secret police) after their liberation. Significantly, her research dispels the "widespread assumption that the majority of former

¹ Edward Westermann's paper was originally delivered at the German Historical Institute's symposium "Keine Kameraden": The Treatment of Soviet Prisoners of War in German POW Camps during the Second World War," organized in cooperation with the US Holocaust Memorial Museum, which took place on October 20, 2022 and included presentations by Esther Meier and Dallas Michelbacher. Michelbacher's presentation is published in this issue of the *Bulletin*. We are unable to publish Meier's original presentation in this

issue but, instead, have included a different contribution by Esther

Meier, co-authored with Andreas Hilger, which also draws on

the project "Soviet and German Prisoners of War and Internees."

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2 Michael Burleigh and Wolfgang Wippermann, *The Racial State: Germany, 1933–1945* (Cambridge, Eng., 1991)

3 Raffael Scheck, *Hitler's African Victims: The German Army Massacres of Black French Soldiers in 1940* (Cambridge, Eng., 2006).

4 David Rolf, *Prisoners of the Reich: Germany's Captives, 1939–1945* (London, 1988), 12.

5 Mark Edale, "Take (No) Prisoners! The Red Army and German POWs, 1941–1943," *Journal of Modern History* 88 (2016): 342–379; Sönke Neitzel and Harald Welzer, *Soldaten: On Fighting, Killing, and Dying*, trans. Jefferson Chase (New York, 2012), 89–94.

POWs was sent to the Gulag"; as she notes, the majority of former POWs were sent back into combat.

Over three decades ago, the historians Michael Burleigh and Wolfgang Wippermann published a work that labeled the Third Reich as *The Racial State*.² In this regard, both Michelbacher and Meier underline the Wehrmacht's embrace of a racial hierarchy in the sorting of POWs, a process that had profound implications for the chances of individual survival as expressed in deaths of 3.3 million Soviet POWs, or roughly 60 percent of those captured, versus 45,000 Italian POWs, or slightly over 7 percent of those taken prisoner, as noted in Michelbacher's paper. Michelbacher also remarks on the lethal distinction made between combatants from metropolitan France and soldiers from the French colonial empire in West Africa, a precedent, it might be added, that was set in the German invasion of France, which resulted in the massacres of as many as 3,000 black French troops in the summer of 1940, as revealed in Raffael Scheck's *Hitler's African Victims*.³ As the experience of British prisoners taken at Dunkirk shows, however, summary execution was not simply reserved for the racial enemies of the Reich but included those who collapsed on marches to the rear and were "shot out of hand," as were starving members of the British Expeditionary Force who broke ranks to scavenge French farmers' fields after their capture.⁴ The practice of summary execution of prisoners unable to keep up with transportation columns occurred as early as the Polish campaign in 1939, and one of the hidden statistics of Soviet prisoner mortality in 1941 involves the summary execution of thousands if not tens of thousands of Soviet prisoners by Wehrmacht forces in the opening months of the invasion.

The routine use of summary killings – whether as a reaction to stubborn Soviet resistance, acts of perfidy during fake surrender attempts, or stories of the mutilation and desecration of Wehrmacht soldiers by Red Army troops – demonstrates how preconceptions of the "Jewish-Bolshevik" enemy facilitated mass killing from the first days of the invasion.⁵ As the German

Landser Willy Peter Reese confided in his journal, “We found only a few isolated Red Army soldiers . . . They were shot. An order had been given not to take any prisoners.”⁶ Reese’s experience was not exceptional. Another German soldier’s letter home openly discussed his own participation in the murder of surrendering POWs: “The first Russian. Since then I have shot hundreds, I have such a rage . . . I took one Russian prisoner, a German [i.e., *Volksdeutscher*].”⁷ Here again, ethnicity determined a prisoner’s fate and the practice of summary execution became a routine practice that extended to the widespread shooting of concentration camp prisoners by SS guards during “death marches” at the end of the war.⁸

In addition to ethnic or national hierarchies, Meier alerts us to the role of gender as another measure used by Wehrmacht forces in the classification and treatment of POWs. Without doubt, female Red Army soldiers – the so-called *Flintenweiber* or “shotgun wenches” – became special targets of retribution by German soldiers in a regime in which rigid perceptions of masculinity framed expectations of acceptable female behavior.⁹ In a secretly recorded conversation, a captured German soldier described Red Army female soldiers as “wild beasts” and, when asked about what was done to them, he responded, “We shot them too.”¹⁰ In truth, these women not only faced execution, but also the added specter of sexual humiliation and sexual violence, as occurred to one female Soviet soldier who was shot, stripped of her pants, posed with her legs splayed, and left along the road.¹¹ With regard to gender, more research is needed on the issue of Wehrmacht brothels as tools of sexual exploitation, a subject that has received widespread attention with respect to abuse of the so-called “comfort women” by Imperial Japanese forces in the Pacific theater.¹²

With regard to Jewish POWs, both Michelbacher and Meier note the “special treatment” of Jewish versus non-Jewish POWs regardless of nationality and Meier emphasizes that Jewish Soviet POWs were “at the bottom of the list.” In the words of one historian, Jewish POWs in both Poland and

6 Willy Peter Reese, *A Stranger to Myself: The Inhumanity of War, Russia, 1941–1944*, trans. Michael Hofmann (New York, 2005), 48.

7 Quoted in David Stahel, *The Battle for Moscow* (Cambridge, Eng., 2015), 42.

8 Alexander Rossino, *Hitler Strikes Poland: Blitzkrieg, Ideology, and Atrocity* (Lawrence, Kan., 2003), 180–181, and Daniel Blatman, *The Death Marches: The Final Phase of Nazi Genocide*, trans. Chaya Galai (Cambridge, Mass., 2011), 154–196.

9 Edward B. Westermann, *Drunk on Genocide: Alcohol and Mass Murder in Nazi Germany* (Ithaca, N.Y., 2021), 193.

10 Neitzel and Welzer, *Soldaten*, 92.

11 Regina Mühlhäuser, *Sex and the Nazi Soldier: Violent, Commercial and Consensual Encounters During the War in the Soviet Union, 1941–1945*, trans. Jessica Spengler (Edinburgh, 2021), 62.

12 Yoshimi Yoshiaki, *Comfort Women: Sexual Slavery in the Japanese Military During World War II*, trans. Suzanne O’Brien (New York, 2000).

13 Aron Shneyer, *Pariahs Among Pariahs: Soviet Jewish POWs in German Captivity, 1941–1945*, trans. Yisrael Cohen (Jerusalem, 2016) and Jochen Böhrer, “‘Tragische Verstrickung’ oder Auftakt zum Vernichtungskrieg? Die Wehrmacht in Polen 1939,” in *Genesis des Genozids, Polen 1939–1941*, ed. Klaus Michael Mallmann and Bogdan Musial (Darmstadt, 2004), 49.

14 Shneyer, *Pariahs among Pariahs*, 40, 66.

15 Edward B. Westermann, “Partners in Genocide: The German Police and the Wehrmacht in the Soviet Union,” *Journal of Conflict Studies* 31 (2008): 771–796.

16 Rossino, *Hitler Strikes Poland*, 185.

the Soviet Union emerged as “pariahs among pariahs” and became targets of ritual violence and summary execution by German forces.¹³ In the case of Poland, a mere 500 of an estimated 60,000 Jewish-Polish soldiers survived the war, less than one percent of the total. Wehrmacht and SS actions in Poland established a lethal precedent for the invasion of Russia in 1941. In but one example, the Security Service (SD) murdered 8,000 Jewish-Soviet POWs interned in Mariupol alone at the end of October 1941.¹⁴ With regard to this last point, Michelbacher and Meier note the cooperation between the Wehrmacht and SS and police forces in the exploitation and murder of POWs, a key point that reveals the partnership of both organizations in the prosecution of genocide.¹⁵

I would like to underline the importance of previous campaigns in Poland and Serbia in establishing the practices and precedents that became part and parcel of the German way of war in the East, especially with regard to POWs and hostages. As the historian Alexander Rossino aptly argued, “More than any other aspect of the Wehrmacht’s campaign in Poland, the widespread nature of crimes against Polish prisoners of war demonstrates the already brutal conduct of the German army in 1939.”¹⁶ It should be emphasized that these crimes committed against Polish POWs occurred despite the fact that both Germany and Poland were signatories to the Third Geneva Convention of 1929, which protected the rights of prisoners. This is a critical point as it reveals subsequent Nazi justifications for the atrocious treatment of Russian POWs, based on the specious argument that the Soviet Union was not a signatory to the convention, as a cynical facade.

By June 1941 a process of accelerating radicalization linked the Nazi regime’s civil and military planning well before Wehrmacht soldiers and their allies moved across the Soviet frontier. As Geoffrey Megargee argued, “Almost from the moment that [the planning] process began, the principals understood that the coming war would be unlike any conflict in modern history . . . because of the ideologically driven policies that

would shape it.”¹⁷ Close collaborations between administrative organizations of the Nazi Party, the SS, and the Wehrmacht led to a series of well-known “criminal orders” that explicitly freed the German army as well as SS and police forces from the constraints of the laws of war. The critical role of senior and mid-level commanders in creating a command climate that promoted the radicalization of behavior among their subordinates is apparent, even if a few military leaders attempted to maintain troop discipline and prevent atrocity.¹⁸

While the criminal orders signified the radicalization of German military policy at the institutional level, the pre-invasion agreements related to the supply of these forces in the East reveal the role played by German bureaucrats and Wehrmacht planners in establishing a dynamic in which genocidal massacre became an intrinsic element of the campaign from its inception. The Wehrmacht’s embrace of this so-called hunger policy provides another critical context for evaluating the army’s role and guilt in the mass death of Soviet POWs. Already on May 2, 1941, German economic and logistical experts had approved a concept for resupplying German forces that only can be described as the largest blueprint for mass murder in history. These administrators bluntly informed army planners that “the war can only be waged if the entire Wehrmacht is fed from Russia.” Not only did they recognize the inability of the Reich to supply food to the troops, they also recognized the implications of such a policy in the remark “as a result x million people will doubtlessly starve.”¹⁹ The initial estimate of “x million” deaths as a result of a policy of premeditated mass starvation would later be concretized in the number of thirty million persons.²⁰ In this regard, the mass deaths of some two million Soviet POWs in the first seven months of the invasion, the highest death rate experienced by any victim group until the implementation of the “Final Solution” and the “peak killing” year of 1942 involving the mass murder of the European Jews, must be seen as an intended and indeed intrinsic part of this process. It was not, in other words, an

17 Geoffrey P. Megargee, *War of Annihilation: Combat and Genocide on the Eastern Front, 1941* (Lanham, Md., 2006), 19.

18 Waitman Beorn, *Marching into Darkness: The Wehrmacht and the Holocaust in Belarus* (Cambridge, Mass., 2014), Ben Shepherd, *Hitler’s Soldiers: The German Army in the Third Reich* (New Haven, Conn., 2016), and Ian Rich, *Holocaust Perpetrators of the German Police Battalions: The Mass Murder of Jewish Civilians, 1940–1942* (London, 2018).

19 Alex J. Kay, “Germany’s Staatssekretäre, Mass Starvation and the Meeting of 2 May 1941,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 41 (2006): 685–700, here 685.

20 Alex J. Kay, “The Purpose of the Russian Campaign is the Decimation of the Slavic Population by Thirty Million: The Radicalization of German Food Policy in Early 1941,” in *Nazi Policy on the Eastern Front, 1941: Total War, Genocide, and Radicalization*, ed. Alex J. Kay (Rochester, N.Y., 2012), 111.

21 Peter Longerich, *Holocaust: The Nazi Persecution and Murder of the Jews* (Oxford, Eng., 2010), 249.

22 International Military Tribunal, *Trial of the Major War Criminals before the International Military Tribunal*, vol. 13 (Washington, D.C., 1952), 319.

23 Edward B. Westermann, *Hitler's Ostkrieg and the Indian Wars: Comparing Genocide and Conquest* (Norman, Okla., 2016), 90–91.

unintended consequence of an overstretched logistics system that prevented adequate food and medicine from reaching the prisoner camps.²¹ In fact, Heinrich Himmler, the Reich Leader of the SS and Chief of the German Police, made this point explicit in his notorious speech on October 4, 1943 in Poznań (Posen) where he described the invasion of the Soviet Union in the following words:

The Russian Army was herded together in great pockets, ground down, taken prisoner. At the time, we did not value the mass of humanity as we value it today: as raw material as labor. The fact that prisoners died of exhaustion and hunger in tens and hundreds of thousands is by no means regrettable from the standpoint of lost generations, but it is deplorable now for reasons of labor.²²

In short, the initial genocidal massacre of Soviet prisoners was part of a larger Nazi policy that envisioned the elimination of tens of millions of Slavs, the complete destruction of the Jews, and the racial restructuring of the occupied territories in the pursuit of a “new Garden of Eden,” a blueprint formulated by Himmler’s SS planners in the General Plan East.²³

In the final analysis, the Wehrmacht’s responsibility for the direct and indirect murder of over three million Soviet prisoners of war represents the single greatest crime committed by the German military during the war. Whether in public commemoration or scholarly discourse, the treatment of the Soviet POWs is finally beginning to receive the attention it deserves, as is apparent with the publication of Volume IV in the USHMM’s *Encyclopedia of Camps and Ghettos* and in “The Research and Documentation Project ‘Soviet Prisoners of War’” as ably presented here this evening by Dallas Michelbacher and Esther Meier. Not only have they offered valuable insights into the institutional face of annihilation, but perhaps more importantly their papers offered examples of the human costs of these policies on specific individuals and allow these actors to regain their voices and their identities.

I, too, would like to close this evening with the voices of two historical actors. First, Konrad Jarausch, a Protestant theologian and German soldier involved in the administration of a Soviet POW camp, lamented to his wife in a letter on September 20, 1941, “The world is so barren without God both here and on the other side of the front . . . yet another one of our [Soviet] prisoners lie dying . . . Such deaths occur by the millions. This is truly the work of the devil.”²⁴ For his part, Gabriel Temkin, a Jewish Red Army soldier who, remarkably, survived German incarceration recalled of his captors: “The perpetrators may have been ‘normal’ and perhaps even ‘banal,’ but what about their deeds? To speak of ‘the banality of evil’ [as expressed by Hannah Arendt] is to trivialize evil.”²⁵ At least in these two testimonies, both perpetrator and victim found agreement concerning the hell of the POW camps and the diabolical nature of Hitler’s “Crusade in the East.”

²⁴ Konrad Jarausch, *Reluctant Accomplice: A Wehrmacht Soldier's Letters from the Eastern Front*, ed. Konrad H. Jarausch (Princeton, N.J., 2011), 291.

²⁵ Gabriel Temkin, *My Just War: The Memoir of a Jewish Red Army Soldier in World War II* (Novato, Calif., 1997), 59.

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